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"I HAVE STOPPED CARING IF I SHOULD THINK BEFORE POSTING ONLINE": JOURNEY OF INDIAN WOMEN TO DIGITAL ACTIVISM AGAINST SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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In this paper, I highlight how Indian women's motivation to protest sexual violence intersects with their commitment to digital space to shape their journey to digital activism. In the fight against sexual violence and harassment, activists are integrating digital strategies to navigate the Indian socio-digital landscape, which is an extension of the sociocultural context they live in. This project investigates digital activism by Indian women against sexual violence under the overarching question of; how digital feminist protest by Indian women activists against sexual violence transpire in India?

Studies on digital activism by women against sexual violence though limited and largely centered on the Global North, provides deep understanding on creation of digital theatrics (Baer, 2016), digital labour (Mendes, 2022) and digital protest strategies in social media (Mendes et al., 2019; Linabary et al., 2022). Representing the Global South, the existing studies on this topic that are focused on India, provides key insights on the role of social media in social action; associated risk and labour (Dey, 2018, Pain, 2021) and the performative aspect of online activism (Lieder, 2018; Fuller, 2019), in a post-colonial setting. Yet, there remains a gap, when it comes to understanding what motivates women to become digital activists and how do they take digital activism beyond social media activism and why, in a socio-cultural framework marked by digital and power divide. I examine the journey of the activists to digital activism; to understand their motivation, access to digital technology; and the reason behind their choice of digital strategies.

My project, 'Digital Activism by Indian Women against Sexual Violence' fills the gap in the existing literature by focusing on aspects of digital access, the intersectionality of socio-cultural identity, class and gender in post-colonial India. The study led to understanding the journey of Indian women to digital activism. The data was collected by online interviews with 20 local Indian women from diverse backgrounds and locations. Anchored in the framework of postcolonial feminism, and implementing

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thematic content analysis, the findings emerged to indicate that the motivation to protest sexual violence as well as digital access, is closely tied to the activist's socio-cultural identity within post-colonial India. Therefore, I argue that the intersection of these two aspects underscores the complex nature of Indian women's digital activism against sexual violence.

Two key factors emerged to be significantly shaping the journey of Indian women to digital activism against sexual violence. First factor is their motivation to protest, which stems from their interaction with post-colonial gender-biased ideologies. I illustrate their motivation to protest by drawing on the theory of positive marginality (Dutt and Grabe, 2014) to apply in the socio-cultural framework of India, that represents a postcolonial context from the Global South. This theory is used as a framework along with post-colonial feminism to argue that the Indian woman activist's position as the marginalised in society creates a sense of their positionality and the injustice, that acts as a motivation to take action against the issue of sexual violence and harassment. Based on the interview data, the analysis indicates that activists draw on their position as women in postcolonial India and the injustice inflicted on them since childhood because of that position (Mankekar, 1997; Nolas et al., 2016), these take place in different forms such as gender biased roles, gender biased expectations, body shaming, victim blaming, sexual harassment and violence, which as a result, set them on a journey to fight against the issue of sexual violence and harassment.

The second factor that shapes the journey of the activists to digital activism is their trajectory to digital access. This aspect explains their method of digital protest and the choices they have to make to legitimise their digital social action. This factor is instrumental in highlighting that the trajectory for each activist to the point of implementing digital strategies in their activism against sexual violence is determined by their class and location. Therefore, I argue that the journey to digital activism for an urban woman in post-colonial India from a privileged background is marked with quick and easy access to digital devices. This plays a big role in influencing the nature of their digital activism. The intersection of the woman's digital privilege with her privilege background gives her the immediate power to be the "voice" for herself and also, the choice to be the voice for "The Other" (Gajjala, 2004, p.178). However, for an activist from a marginal background and a location that is considered to be peripheral in comparison to dominant urban society, the journey is marked with rigorous specialised training and education with a focus on the subject of activism against sexual violence. Therefore, I argue in this paper that an activist from a marginalised background has to navigate and assert her position by proving her labour and hard work in the postcolonial urban setting of India. This is to bridge the gap between her marginalised position and their point of initiation of digital activism against sexual violence and harassment. By outlining these trajectories, I emphasise in this paper that the intersection of the activist's position within post-colonial India with their motivation and the digital accessibility act as a catalyst for their activism and shapes their strategies in the digital space. This helps to understand the reason behind the unique digital protest methods and the digital strategies that are implemented and chosen by local Indian women to challenge sexual violence and harassment.

This paper aims to provide contextual understanding of how Indian women leverage digital tools and strategies to combat sexual violence, while they feel like “The Other” (Gajjala, 2004, p.178) in a patriarchal society. I illustrate that in my paper by indicating the different ways Indian women bring legitimacy and credibility in their digital action against sexual violence while safeguarding themselves in the Indian socio-digital space. This is because the socio-digital space mirrors the inequities of the socio-cultural framework of post-colonial India in which they live. This paper contributes to understand the role class, status and geographical location plays in women's journey to digital activism against sexual violence, within a post-colonial Global South country as India. This paper significantly contributes to the discourse and existing research on digital feminist activism from the Global South, which is currently understudied.

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